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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CLEANSING

REF: 05 GUATEMALA 1745

¶1. Summary: The phrase "social cleansing" has entered wide usage in Guatemala, even though it is generally used to refer to vigilantism. While no evidence has yet surfaced of a state policy of extrajudicial killings of undesirable elements -- the definition of social cleansing -- the Human Rights Ombudsman has requested a special commission to investigate possible police involvement in such activity. End summary.

"Social Cleansing" in the Lexicon

¶2. As predicted reftel, the phrase "social cleansing" has entered wide usage in Guatemala. The now common occurrence of multiple killings, complete with gruesome evidence of torture and mutilation, has led many observers to suspect organized campaigns to eliminate gang members, drug dealers, thieves, other social undesirables, and even gays. "Social cleansing" refers to the extrajudicial killings of undesirable elements of society by state actors. As there is no reliable evidence of state involvement, the phenomenon receiving so much recent attention would be more accurately referred to as "vigilantism".

Gangs, Vigilantism, and High-Profile Examples

¶3. Government of Guatemala (GOG) authorities have long pointed to inter-gang and intra-gang violence to explain the numbers of suspected criminals found dead in Guatemala City and other municipalities. While such violence is commonplace, it is now also common to find groups of victims dumped along roadsides, often with messages indicating the victims were thieves, drug dealers, or other types of criminals. Some messages specifically state that the victims were killed in acts of social cleansing. PNC data indicates that 218 victims showed signs of torture in 2005, compared to only 20 in 2004.

¶4. In San Lucas Toliman, a town in the Solola Department, several bodies were found with such notes. At the same time, a group calling itself the "People's Social Cleansing Group" began patrolling neighborhoods and demanding protection money from businessmen and landowners, and demanding that all young men "join" the organization by paying dues. The group even issued receipts for money collected. National Civilian Police (PNC) agents arrested seven leaders of the group for extortion and are investigating their links to local killings. On February 9, seven bodies were found in Mixco, a satellite municipality of Guatemala City. The bodies were lined neatly in a ditch, hands were tied behind their backs, and the bodies showed evidence of torture. This case prompted Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH) Sergio Morales to call for a meeting of the Security Cabinet to discuss the phenomenon.

Real "Social Cleansing"?

¶5. In 2005, Morales concluded that there was no evidence to support charges that the GOG was engaging in a policy of social cleansing, although it was possible that off-duty police, acting outside of their official roles, might be involved in organized violence against specific groups. Recently, however, PDH has requested that the Ministry of Government (Interior) establish a special commission to investigate 87 cases from 2005 that some actors allege may have had PNC involvement. PDH officials told us that the allegations of PNC involvement were based on statements from witnesses, but that the majority of them would not file formal denunciations.

¶6. PDH officials noted that characteristics of such vigilantism differed from inter-gang and intra-gang killings. Gang affiliated killings, they opined, are committed with firearms or edged weapons, the bodies are found in gang-ridden neighborhoods, and there is no message accompanying the bodies. Supposed social cleansing or vigilantism killings, on the other hand, are often committed by strangulation, show signs of torture, have the hands tied behind their backs, are dumped in areas distant from gang-ridden neighborhoods, and have anti-gang messages accompanying or written on the bodies.

Levels of Violence

¶7. Latin America, Morales continued, averages 30 violent

deaths per 100,000 population. Guatemala far exceeds that with a rate of 42 per 100,000, but even that number is dwarfed by the rates in the departments of Izabal and Escuintla, which have rates of 88 and 84, respectively.

Comment

18. We support the idea of a special commission to investigate these cases, given that little attention is paid to any patterns of violence in this country. In addition to investigating the crimes, it would demonstrate a commitment to rule of law by the GOG that is not always apparent to the populace. Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights Frank La Rue stressed that the GOG has no policy of social cleansing and PDH's Sergio Morales seconded the statement. We believe them, but the GOG will need to do a better job of protecting its citizenry. That vigilantism is becoming more common seems clear; the GOG needs to do a better job of investigating and prosecuting such action as well as the underlying crime that encourages such vigilantism. These events have prompted NGOs and the media to raise an alarm that, while accurate, fails to take into account the deeper problem of impunity for criminal action.

19. The Mixco killings, along with several others of this type, indicate a level of organization much more sophisticated than mere gang-land slayings. The list of potential culprits for this and similar cases is long and could include off-duty PNC, off-duty military, former police, former military, private security guards (three times more than police), ex-Civil Self Defense Patrols, organized crime, gangs, and bands of frustrated civilians.

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